Gender and Armed Conflict *

Siwan Anderson† Maria Micaela Sviatschi‡

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the quantitative literature on the relationship between gender and armed conflict, focusing on two key perspectives: women as victims and women as agents. It first reviews research on the consequences of conflict for women and girls, highlighting both direct effects — such as gender-based violence and forced displacement — and indirect effects in post-conflict settings, including declines in personal security, education, economic outcomes, and health. The paper then shifts to examine women's political roles in conflict, whether as participants in resistance movements or as peace-builders and agents of post-conflict reconstruction. While there is a growing body of innovative research on these critical issues, significant opportunities remain for further empirical and experimental work, particularly studies that seek to establish causal mechanisms and expand our understanding of gendered dynamics in settings damaged by conflict.

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†Vancouver School of Economics: siwan.anderson@ubc.ca

‡Princeton University: msviatschi@princeton.edu

1 Introduction

Relative to other disciplines in the social sciences, the economics literature on conflict has tended to overlook the relevance of gender. Yet there are clear and compelling reasons to investigate the roles of women — not only as victims, but also as active participants — across all stages of conflict: before, during, and after. Recognizing women's experiences and contributions in these phases may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social and economic dynamics of conflict. Such an understanding may also inform the design of more inclusive and effective policy interventions in conflict-affected settings.

The suffering of women during conflict is well-documented. A recent United Nations report identifies over 170 armed conflicts worldwide, with approximately 612 million women and girls living within 50 kilometers of these conflict zones, and constitutes a 150% increase from a decade ago. Moreover, civilians now account for nearly 90% of war casualties, the majority of whom are women and children. In 2023, the proportion of women killed in armed conflict doubled relative to the previous year.

Armed conflicts and their associated violations often lead to widespread internal displacement and refugee flows. It is estimated that over 75% of displaced people are women and children, and in some refugee populations, they comprise up to 90%. Internally displaced women, frequently the heads of their households, are particularly vulnerable to the loss of livelihoods, lack of access to reproductive healthcare, and heightened exposure to violence, exploitation, trafficking, forced recruitment, and abduction. In Yemen alone, women and girls make up 80% of the 4.5 million people currently displaced by conflict.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is another persistent and pervasive consequence of armed conflict. Women and girls are subject to a range of abuses, including murder, torture, sexual slavery, forced marriage, pregnancy, and sterilization. Wartime sexual violence has been a recurrent atrocity throughout history and remains widespread today. In 2024, the number of UN-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence was 50% higher than in the previous year. Crucially, such violence often persists into post-conflict settings, potentially undermining recovery efforts.

Importantly, women are not solely victims of conflict — they are also agents of change. Female marginalization can contribute to both the onset and the resolution of conflict. Historically and in contemporary settings, women have participated as combatants, members of civil society, human rights defenders, and actors in both formal and informal peace-building processes. Despite international commitments to promoting women's

participation in peace and security, decision-making remains dominated by men. In 2023, women made up only 9.6% of negotiators in peace processes, even though studies suggest that peace agreements are more durable and effectively implemented when women are involved.

Despite its significance, research on gender dynamics in conflict remains limited due to several challenges. First, gendered violence and disparities during conflicts are often normalized within communities and overlooked by institutions, as they may reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and power structures. Second, despite recent significant efforts to document gender disparities—including sexual and political violence—in conflict settings, gathering accurate data remains notoriously difficult. Survivors often fear stigma, retaliation, or a lack of justice, which contributes to severe under-reporting and unreliable administrative data. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at protecting women and girls during and after conflict and their contributions to peace-building, underscoring the need for more quantitative research in this area.

Building on these observations, this paper reviews the quantitative literature on the intersections between gender and armed conflict, with the aim of identifying research gaps particularly well-suited to economic analysis. We begin by examining the bidirectional relationship between gender inequality and conflict. On one hand, armed conflict often imposes disproportionate costs on women, deepening existing gender disparities. On the other hand, higher levels of gender equality may help reduce the likelihood or intensity of conflict by increasing women's participation in peace processes and political institutions more broadly.

This two-way relationship provides the organizing framework for the paper. Section 3 reviews quantitative studies that analyze how conflict disproportionately affects women. Section 4 shifts focus to research that examines women as active agents in conflict and peace-building. Section 5 discusses the role of gender-based policies in conflict and post-conflict settings. Finally, Section 6 outlines directions for future research.

2 Gender Inequality and Conflict

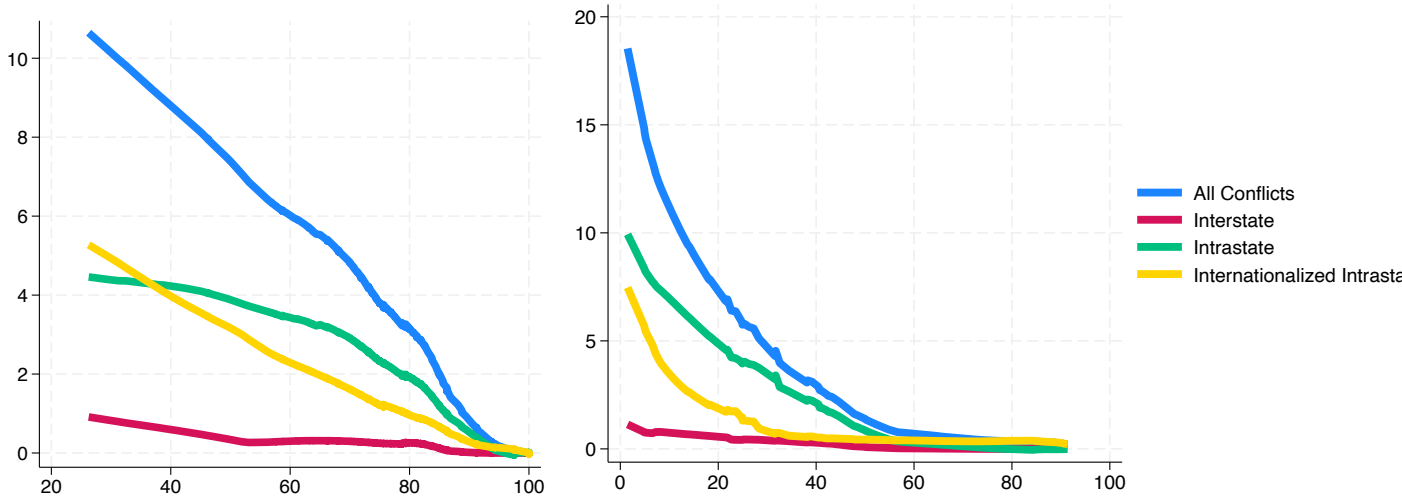
An encompassing stylized fact that is relevant for the study of gender and conflict is that countries that display high levels of gender equality (along several different dimensions) are less likely to be associated with armed conflict. Figure 1 depicts this relationship using country-level measures of conflict incidence (during the years of 2010-2023)[1] and

[1]These aggregate conflict measures come from the the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Refer to: https://ucdp.uu.se/.

two different gender equality indices.

The first index measures the degree of legal equality that women face with respect to work access and remuneration, asset ownership and entrepreneurship, marriage and inheritance, mobility and security.[2] The second index quantifies social biases against women as measured by people's attitudes on women's role in society along four key dimensions: political, educational, economic, and physical integrity. The index is increasing in gender unbiased attitudes.[3] We observe that there is a strong negative relationship between intrastate conflict incidence and both of these measures of gender equality.

Figure 1: Conflict Incidence and Gender Equality - Plots



(a) Gender Legal Equality (b) Gender Equal Norms

Notes: Data Sources: UCDP; Women, Business and the Law (WBL); and UNDP Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI). Horizontal axis is total number of conflicts between 2010 and 2023. Vertical axis is a gender equality index measured in 2023. Lowess smoothing graphs.

This negative correlation observed in Figure 1 is not a causal relationship but it is statistically significant and robust to the inclusion of control variables known to be strongly correlated with conflict incidence like economic development and democracy.[4] Figure 2 reports the coefficient estimates (and their 95% confidence intervals) from regression analyses which estimate the effect of a measure of gender equality (either legal or norms based) on the total number of conflicts experienced by a country. The

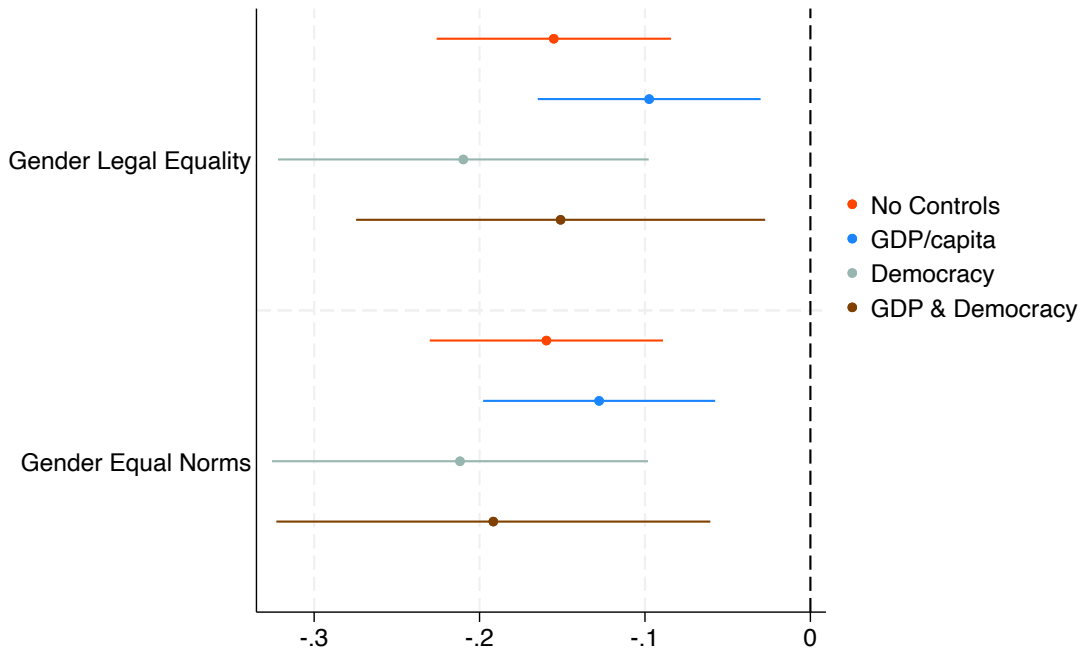
[2]The index is constructed by the World Bank using codified sources of national laws, such as: constitutions, marriage and family codes, labour codes, passport procedures, citizenship rules, inheritance statutes, tax regulations, land laws, and social security codes. For more details, refer to Hyland et al. (2020).

[3]The index is constructed by UNDP. Refer to: https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni/indicies/GSNI.

[4]See, for example: Hegre (2014) and Ray and Esteban (2017), among many others.

four different coefficient estimates (for each measure of gender equality, respectively) correspond to distinct regression specifications which vary by which control variables are included. The first specification (in red) includes no controls; the second (in blue) includes GDP/capita as a control; the third (in green) includes a democracy score; and the fourth (in brown) includes both of these control variables. We see that the negative correlation between conflict incidence and both measures of gender equality is statistically significant across all four of these empirical specifications.

Figure 2: Conflict Incidence and Gender Equality - Estimations



Notes: Coefficient plots visualizing the coefficient estimates and their 95% confidence intervals from regressions where the dependent variable is the total number of conflicts and the explanatory variable is a measure of gender equality. Each coefficient refers to a distinct regression specification which vary by different sets of control variables included into the regressions. Standard errors are robust. Data Sources: UCDP; Women, Business and the Law (WBL); UNDP Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI); World Bank Open Data; Polity V Score.

The research that studies this aggregate relationship generally identifies two main channels to explain this overall correlation: one institutional and the other norms-based. Both rest on the assumption that women are, on average, more inclined towards peace than men (Fukuyama (1998)). The most direct channel operates through political institutions — both formal and informal. In more gender-equal societies, women are more likely to attain leadership positions and, in turn, are more likely to pursue peaceful policies and avoid the use of force.[5] Informally, gender-equal societies also provide women

[5]See, for example, Caprioli and Boyer (2001), Koch and Fulton (2011), and Melander (2005), among

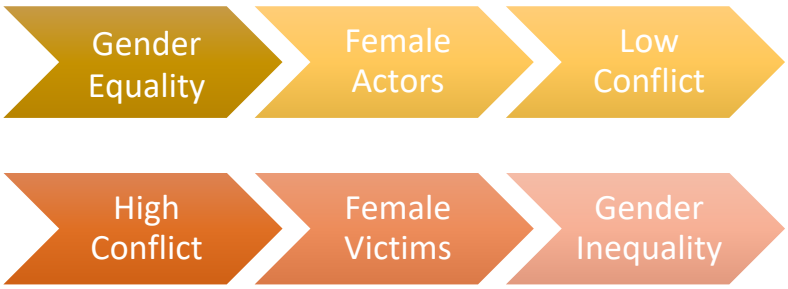
with greater political voice through civic organizations and grassroots movements, enabling them to exert pressure on decision-makers in favour of peace.

The second channel operates through cultural norms. The hypothesis here is that male-biased societies are more likely to promote patriarchal values — such as honour and aggressive masculinity — that normalize violent responses to perceived slights, thereby fostering militaristic tendencies.[6]

Both of these channels are conceptually compelling and warrant further investigation. If the underlying driver of this robust correlation is indeed rooted in systematic differences in preferences between men and women, then the persistence of this relationship strongly suggests that women may play a meaningful role across all stages of the conflict cycle: in preventing the outbreak of violence, in shaping peace negotiations during conflict, and in contributing to post-conflict recovery and reconstruction.

However, existing studies have not definitively established a causal link between higher levels of gender equality and reduced conflict incidence, and quite plausibly the direction of causality may also go the other direction. That is, greater conflict intensity can lead to increased gender inequality via the disproportionate negative consequences that fell upon females.

Figure 3: Gender Inequality and Armed Conflict



This two-way relationship (depicted in Figure 3) sets up the structure of this paper. The next section reviews the quantitative research on how conflict disproportionately disadvantages and victimizes women. The subsequent section shifts perspective to examine studies that explore women as active participants and agents of change in conflict and peace-building processes.

others. However, this association is not universal. Dube and Harish (2020), for instance, analyze early modern Europe and find that polities ruled by queens engaged in warfare more frequently than those ruled by kings.

[6]See, for example, Caprioli (2000), Forsberg and Olsson (2021), and Bjarnegård et al. (2017), among others.

3 Females as Conflict Victims

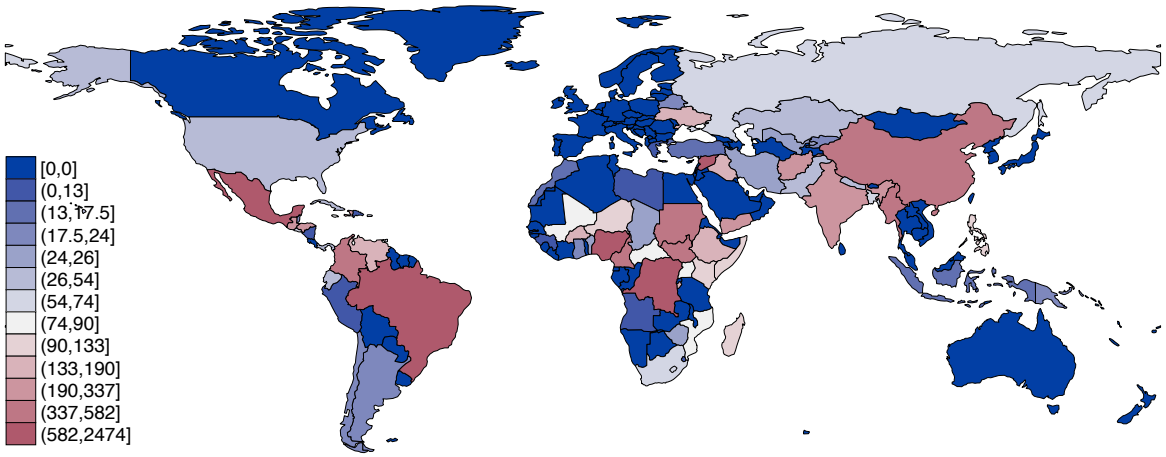
3.1 Political Violence

One of the most direct ways in which armed conflict exacerbates gender inequalities is through the widespread occurrence of gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls. This includes a broad range of severe abuses, such as murder, torture, sexual slavery, rape, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, and forced sterilization. These various forms of GBV during times of war and conflict have been extensively documented, particularly through detailed case studies. While much of the existing evidence is qualitative in nature, there is a growing effort to compile systematic datasets with the aim of better identifying when such violence occurs and uncovering its underlying determinants.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has developed a curated dataset that tracks civilian-targeted violence perpetrated by armed political actors, specifically focusing on incidents in which women and/or girls constitute the majority of victims or are explicitly targeted.[7] Figure 4 illustrates the global distribution of such gender-based violence between 2020 and 2024. The data reveal stark regional disparities, with several countries experiencing alarmingly high levels of GBV against female civilians over this relatively short period. Mexico recorded the highest number of incidents, with approximately 2,500 attacks, followed by Brazil with over 1,600. Between 600 and 750 attacks were recorded in Myanmar, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria. The perpetrators of this violence include organized armed actors, such as government forces, rebel groups, militias, cartels, and gangs.

[7] In recent years, ACLED has expanded its coverage to include gender-based and political violence against women by systematically collecting data from diverse sources, including local, regional, and national media outlets, government and NGO reports, new media platforms, and networks of local data collection partners.

Figure 4: Gender-Based Violence and Armed Conflict



Notes: Data Sources: ACLED. Total number of GBV attacks between 2020-2024.

There is significant potential for causal empirical research using the cross-sectional and panel structure of this curated ACLED data to better understand the occurrence and drivers of political violence targeted against women. For example, Anderson and Jaramillo (2025) leverage this dataset to investigate whether climate change intensifies such violence. They find that negative climate shocks — measured by episodes of excessive heat — are associated with increases in female-targeted civilian attacks. Their results suggest a behavioural response among male perpetrators, whereby climate-induced stress leads to heightened aggression directed at women. Notably, the effect is moderated by indicators of female empowerment: societies with higher levels of gender equality experience a smaller increase in GBV following climate shocks. This supports the hypothesis that armed male actors are more likely to commit acts of GBV under conditions of climate stress in environments characterized by strong gender bias and patriarchal norms.

The most dominant form of GBV in armed conflict is sexual. Wartime sexual violence is not a new phenomenon — it has occurred throughout history and continues to be a recurring atrocity in contemporary conflicts. For instance, UN Women reports an estimated 25 to 50 thousand Bosnian women and girls were raped in the Bosnian war (between 1991 and 1995); between a quarter to half a million women and girls were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; and more than 60,000 in the civil war in Sierra Leone. Estimates suggest that 48 rapes took place every hour during the height of conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (Peterman et al. (2011)).

For centuries, perpetrators of sexual attacks during conflicts have enjoyed effective impunity. Finally, in 2008, the UN Security Council passed a resolution declaring

that rape and other forms of sexual violence constituted a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.

Countless women and girls have also been abducted and forcibly assigned as 'wives' to combatants and held captive within forced marriages in conflict zones around the world. These women are expected to submit to ongoing rape and to provide domestic labour to their 'husbands'. Notable contemporary examples of rebel groups committing such atrocities include: the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, Boko Haram, the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda; and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone; the Taliban; the Kachin Independence Organization in Myanmar; among many others.

The classification of forced marriage as an international crime remains contested, as it is not explicitly codified in any international criminal statute, unlike sexual slavery, which is. Though it has been recognized as an international crime in several special appeals courts. The first was the 2008 ruling by the Appeals Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Since then, forced marriage charges have been brought against individual commanders in cases concerning Cambodia, Rwanda, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the former Yugoslavia, and other conflict-affected contexts.

The literature in political science on sexual violence during conflict commonly categorizes these acts into three broad types: (i) strategic violence used as a tactic of war; (ii) tolerated but unofficial practices; and (iii) opportunistic violence committed by individual combatants (Wood (2006); Nordås and Cohen (2021)).

As a tactic of war, sexual violence is intentionally employed to achieve strategic objectives such as instilling terror, dishonouring communities, demoralizing opponents, and emasculating enemy forces (Leiby (2009); Skjelsbaek (2001)). In some instances, it is used with genocidal intent (Sitkin et al. (2019)). For example, the deliberate impregnation of women from a targeted community may aim to erase ethnic identities by disrupting bloodlines and communal continuity.

As a tolerated practice, sexual violence may not be formally ordered by military or rebel leadership, but it is implicitly condoned through the absence of punishment or intervention (Wood (2018)). In this context, rape may also serve as a method of socialization within armed groups, particularly when recruits are forcibly conscripted. Here, commanders may use sexual violence to foster group cohesion and loyalty (Cohen (2013); Green (2004)). Additionally, women and girls are often exploited to provide sexual services to combatants. This exploitation can be encouraged by commanders as a form of "compensation" for unpaid fighters—analogous to looting from civilian populations.

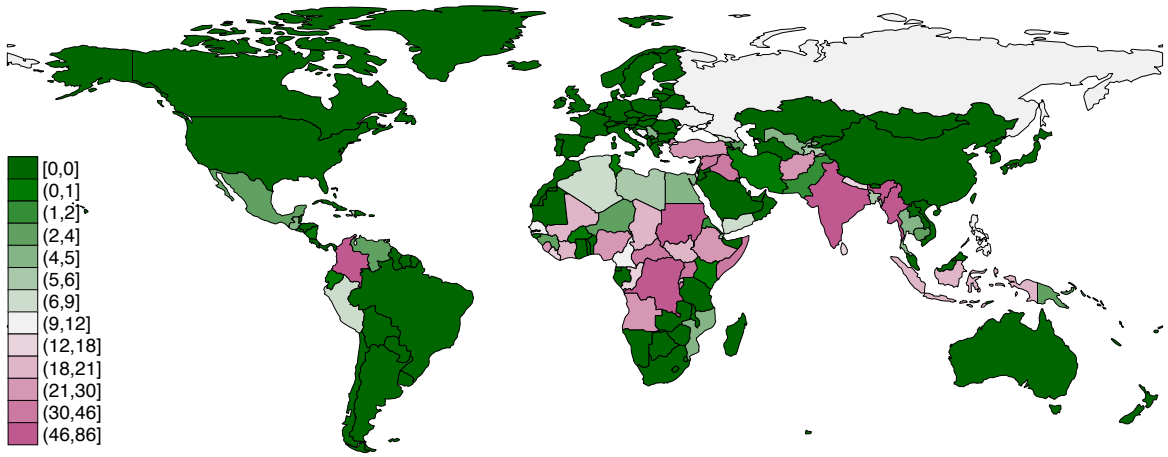
Opportunistic sexual violence, by contrast, is viewed as more spontaneous and individualistic. It is typically committed by rogue actors during the chaos of war, in environments where norms have broken down and impunity prevails. These acts are primarily driven by private motivations and individual impulses, rather than military objectives (Wood (2009)).

Accurately measuring the incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) during conflict remains a major challenge. However, the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset compiled by Cohen and Nordås (2014) represents a significant advancement in this area.[8] Building on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database, SVAC documents the prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors in each conflict between 1989 and 2021. The definition of sexual violence used in SVAC is based on the International Criminal Court's legal framework and includes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, sexual mutilation, sexual torture, and forced sterilization or abortion. The perpetrators include state forces, pro-government militias, and rebel groups.

Figure 5 presents the global distribution of conflict-related sexual violence by armed actors. The countries with the highest recorded incidence include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, India, and Sudan.

[8]Measuring gender-based violence presents significant challenges, as such incidents are often underreported due to stigma, fear of reprisal, and cultural or institutional barriers to disclosure. In addition, existing administrative data may be prone to measurement error and reporting bias, limiting its reliability and comparability across contexts. The SVAC project explicitly acknowledges the significant challenges related to underreporting and implements several measures to mitigate these biases. In particular, SVAC addresses underreporting by triangulating across three major, reputable sources—U.S. State Department, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch—to cross-validate reports and reduce systemic gaps. See: http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/.

Figure 5: Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict



Notes: Data Sources: SVAC. Total number of conflicts with sexual violence committed by armed actors between 1989-2021.

Using the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) cross-sectional time series data, Cohen and Nordås (2014) uncover that the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict varies dramatically by perpetrator group, suggesting that sexual violations are common, but not ubiquitous. Even within the same country or conflict setting, some armed groups commit sexual violence while others do not. The authors describe that state militaries are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual violence compared to either rebel groups or militias (see also Leiby (2009)). The study also reveals that reports of sexual violence continue into the post-conflict period, sometimes at very high levels.[9]

Guarnieri and Tur-Prats (2023) use the SVAC database to investigate how gender-biased norms increase the incidence of sexual violence committed in some of the on-going ethnic conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa. The authors document how ethnic groups with ancestral arrangements that support more gender-unequal norms, are more likely to engage in sexual violence than those where women have historically held prominent roles. They further demonstrate the relevance of relative cultural distance between perpetrators and victims. When perpetrators confront a society with relatively more gender equality, they may perceive the relatively improved position of women as a threat to their ideals, using sexual violence as a means to reassert what they perceive as a lost cultural norm.

Fourati et al. (2021) also analyse data on sexual violence committed against civilians by

[9]There are a few other cross-national studies of wartime rape or sexual violence. The Green (2004) dataset of 'collective rape' coded from newspaper articles covers 37 countries. Butler and Gluch (2007) focus on the global variation in sexual violence by state security forces. Farr (2009) focuses on 'extreme war rape' in 27 countries.

armed groups in Africa. The authors demonstrate that the incidence of sexual violence rises when there is an exogenous increase in the value of artisanal mining. They argue that this can occur when the price of the resource increases and when the resource is difficult to tax. It is then conjectured that this type of violence serves as a non-lethal means for armed groups to enforce high taxation while preserving local labour. They find that an increase in gold mining, a labour intensive resource that can easily be concealed, results in increased sexual violence. Local resources that are more capital intensive than artisanal mining have no relation to sexual violence.

DiGiuseppe and Haer (2023) investigate the relationship between armed conflict and the prevalence of child marriage. In conflict settings, families may be more inclined to marry off their young daughters as a form of protection. Alternatively, wartime tactics that specifically target girls, such as sexual violence and the recruitment of girl soldiers, may directly lead to early and forced marriages. To empirically examine these dynamics, the authors combine Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from conflict-affected countries in West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone) between 1996 and 2014 with data on violent events. Their findings reveal a strong positive relationship between conflicts characterized by sexual violence and girl recruitment, and the likelihood of child marriage. In conflicts where these tactics are employed, the incidence of early marriage increases substantially.

This work has touched upon the role of gender-biased norms and economic constraints as key determinants of the incidence of GBV in conflict settings. However, there remains considerable scope for further causal empirical research aimed at identifying precise drivers of GBV in conflict and post-conflict periods. This includes investigating the full spectrum of GBV, from sexual violence and forced marriage to abduction and exploitation. A particularly crucial question is why some armed actors systematically engage in GBV while others do not. Understanding the strategic, organizational, and contextual factors that drive these differences is essential for developing effective prevention and accountability mechanisms. Moreover, while much of the existing literature focuses on the conflict period, further work is needed to examine whether these dynamics persist in post-conflict settings and to explore potential inter-generational effects on children.

3.2 Forced Displacement

Another direct consequence of armed conflict for women is forced displacement. Applying age–sex distribution information from available data to all displaced populations (from the UNHCR and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre databases), Bendavid et al. (2021) estimate the number of women and children displaced by armed conflicts

worldwide. In 2009, the authors estimated 18.5 million children and 10.6 million women were forcibly displaced, by 2017, these figures had risen to 35.7 million children and 16.2 million women. The vast majority of these displacements occurred in just six countries: Syria, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

The study by Gökçe and Kïrdar (2024) examines the effects of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent displacement of refugees into Jordan on intimate partner violence (IPV). Using individual-level data that records the timing of the first instance of physical violence experienced by women at the hands of their husbands, the authors conduct a duration analysis centered around two critical life events: exposure to civil war and the transition to refugee status in Jordan. They find that both events are associated with an increased risk of IPV. While the risk of IPV rises significantly following the refugees' arrival in Jordan, it gradually declines over time. The authors attribute this temporal pattern to initial economic hardship—marked by reduced household wealth and employment losses among refugee men—that improves as households begin to stabilize. The authors have access to geo-coded locations of refugee households which allows them to calculate refugee density. The study further reveals that greater social isolation, indicated by reduced proximity to other refugees, significantly exacerbates the risk of IPV among these women.

Foster et al. (2024) examine changes in marital patterns among Syrian women by tracking them across three stages of residence: their time in pre-war Syria (before 2011), post-war Syria (after the onset of conflict but prior to migration), and as refugees in Turkey. The authors find that early marriage was more prominent among refugees who were unmarried at the time of migration, compared to those already married before displacement. This pattern aligns with observed declines in household income and the reduced opportunity cost of marriage for young women in refugee settings. Their duration analysis also reveals a notable shift from traditional arranged marriages to more modern marriage forms among Syrian refugees in Turkey. The study of Gökçe and Kïrdar (2024) likewise uncovers a decline in cousin marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Other research focuses on the labour market impacts of forced displacement. Kondylis (2010) examine displaced Bosnians during the early 1990s, leveraging the fact that the intensity of local violence influenced the decision to flee, while pre-war economic conditions were largely orthogonal to violence levels. This identification strategy is grounded in the argument that the path of the war was driven by strategic efforts by Serb forces to spatially separate ethnic groups, rather than by local economic performance. Control-

ling for these selection concerns, the study finds that displacement significantly reduced women's labour force participation, with displaced women more likely to exit the labour market.

Demirci and Kırdar (2023) study a representative sample of Syrian refugees in Turkey to analyze gendered labour market integration. Their findings show that the native–refugee employment gap among men narrows substantially within the first year of residence, after which little difference remains. In contrast, for women — particularly those whose mother tongue is Arabic or Kurdish — the employment gap persists over time, highlighting enduring structural and cultural barriers to female labour force participation among refugee populations.

This emerging research provides causal evidence on some of the socio-economic consequences faced by female refugees fleeing conflict. However, there remains substantial scope for further investigation into both the consequences and determinants of these outcomes, not only for women themselves but also for their children. In addition, certain subpopulations merit dedicated study, such as female-headed households and women and girls who are victims of trafficking. These groups may experience unique vulnerabilities and pathways of disadvantage that are not captured in broader refugee studies. Finally, little is known about whether individuals displaced from communities with gender-unequal ancestral norms may replicate similar patterns of sexual violence in host communities with more egalitarian gender relations. This question is especially pertinent in light of evidence from the preceding sections, which suggests that origin community norms can influence sexual violence during conflict and that displacement could involve significant cultural distance between origin and host societies.

3.3 Intimate Partner Violence

Compared the to the literature just discussed on two direct effects of conflict, GBV and forced displacement, there is a more extensive empirical literature documenting the long-term causal consequences of exposure to conflict on violence against women and girls.

A central repercussion of focus has been heightened levels of IPV among victims of war. Combining data from 48 DHS surveys (covering 23 countries) in Sub-Saharan Africa with records of all conflict events in the region post-WWII, La Mattina and Shemyakina (2024) explore the relationship between growing up amid armed conflict and acceptance of violent behaviour later in life. To causally identify the impacts, the authors exploit within-country variation in conflict exposure across survey clusters and over birth years. Their findings reveal that women exposed to armed conflict before

the age of 20 are significantly more likely to accept domestic violence than women from the same communities who either experienced war later in life or were born after the conflict had ended.

This cross-national study in Africa for a large set of countries and conflicts showing the change in attitudes towards IPV is consistent with the relationship found for experiencing actual IPV in more context-specific analyses. La Mattina (2017) uses data from Rwanda and exploit variation in genocide intensity across localities and variation in women's years of marriage to test whether the conflict altered the risk of spousal violence in couples that formed after the end of the genocide relative to couples that formed before. The authors uncover that exposure to genocide increased the probability of spousal violence for women who married after the genocide relative to women who married before. Likewise, Ajefu and Casale (2024) use the 2008 Nigerian DHS and show that women exposed to war during childhood are more likely to be victims of domestic violence in adulthood compared to those not exposed to war, with larger effects observed for those exposed at younger ages. In another study, Ekhator-Mobayode et al. (2022) link household-level data from the 2008 and 2013 Nigerian DHS with spatially coded conflict data from the Boko Haram actor file in the ACLED database. Their results show a rising impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on women's experience of both physical and sexual IPV, highlighting how insurgent violence can spill over into private spheres of violence against women.

In closely related work for other parts of the world, Torrisi (2021) examines the long-term effects of exposure to armed conflict during childhood on women's risk of experiencing IPV in four former Soviet republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Tajikistan. The study combines IPV data from the corresponding DHS with geo-referenced conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The authors find that exposure to armed violence at early ages — particularly between ages 0 and 10 — is significantly associated with an increased risk of experiencing IPV later in life. This association is especially strong for physical forms of IPV, confirming that early exposure to conflict may shape long-term vulnerability to interpersonal violence.

Using detailed records of conflict-related events compiled by the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Gutierrez and Gallegos (2016) examine the impact of Peru's internal armed conflict—initiated in 1980 when the Shining Path declared war against the Peruvian state—on women's experiences of IPV. By linking these conflict data to IPV outcomes from the DHS, the authors also conclude that exposure to conflict is associated with a significant increase in IPV.

Similarly, Svallfors (2023) investigates this relationship in the context of the Colom-

bian armed conflict, which began in the mid-1960s with the rise of left-wing guerrilla groups seeking to influence state policy through violence. Over the following decades, Colombia experienced persistent violence involving multiple actors, including the government, guerrilla groups (such as FARC and ELN), right-wing paramilitaries, and organized crime cartels. Once again, using geo-referenced data from UCDP in conjunction with Colombian DHS surveys, the study finds that local exposure to armed conflict significantly increases the likelihood that women experience emotional, physical, and sexual violence perpetrated by their intimate partners.

To explain the enduring effects of early conflict exposure on IPV later in life, many researchers emphasize the normalization of violence. Armed conflict may desensitize individuals to violence, leading to its broader social acceptance, whether perpetrated by combatants or civilians. Exposure to war can reduce empathy, foster a dehumanized view of victims, and shift norms around acceptable behaviours. Additionally, the psychosocial repercussions of war trauma, particularly for former male combatants, may contribute to more aggressive behaviour within households.

Evidence from non-conflict settings further supports these mechanisms. Cesur and Sabia (2016) show that women in the United States married to active-duty military men face a significantly higher risk of domestic violence when their spouses have been deployed to combat zones. The study attributes this increased risk to elevated stress and trauma among returning servicemen. Similarly, Stojetz and Brück (2023) investigate the long-term effects of exposure to wartime sexual violence during the Angolan civil war. Exploiting variation in individual soldiers' likelihood of witnessing or being involved in such violence, the authors find that those with higher exposure are significantly more likely to commit IPV against their partners more than a decade after the conflict ended.[10]

Related research underscores that men with military experience tend to hold less gender-equal attitudes on average (Dahl et al. (2021); Amelia Gibbons and Rossi (2022)), suggesting that both socialization within military institutions and wartime experiences may reinforce patriarchal or violent norms.

Researchers also highlight the potential link between increased acceptance of violence and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms. In such contexts, violence against women may be viewed not as a criminal act but as a natural expression of masculinity. Sev-

[10] Lindsey (2022) offers a more nuanced perspective of these effects. The author analyzes focus groups from comparable villages in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that experienced varying levels of exposure to conflict. The study finds that recent exposure to armed violence increases men's support for harsher punishment of crimes such as rape and theft, while simultaneously decreasing the severity of punishment that both men and women advocate for in cases of domestic violence.

eral of the studies cited above further document declines in other indicators of female empowerment in the aftermath of conflict, such as diminished influence in household decision-making (Ajefu and Casale (2024); Ekhator-Mobayode et al. (2022); La Mattina et al. (2017)).

Exploring similar themes, a growing body of research examines the gendered consequences of proximity to military infrastructure. Parra and Shibuya (2024), for example, analyze military base placements across Colombian municipalities between 1998 and 2016. Using an event-study design, they estimate the causal impact of military presence on local rates of sexual violence, finding significant increases in municipalities located near bases. Similarly, Brodeur et al. (2017) show that the historical placement of U.S. military bases during the Vietnam War contributed to the long-term proliferation of commercial sex work in Thailand, suggesting enduring gendered impacts of military presence beyond wartime.

3.4 Education and Health

Another long-term consequence of conflict emphasized in the literature is the disproportionate burden it places on women and girls due to the breakdown of essential service delivery. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that more than one in four women and girls globally experience moderate or severe food insecurity; in conflict-affected settings, this figure rises to one in two. The collapse of sexual and reproductive health services during conflict further exposes women and girls to elevated risks of unplanned pregnancy, maternal mortality and morbidity, severe reproductive injuries, and sexually transmitted infections. Educational access can also be deeply compromised. For example, Oxfam reports that in conflict-affected South Sudan, an adolescent girl is three times more likely to die in childbirth than to complete primary school.

A growing body of causal empirical work provides evidence in support of these patterns. Amberg et al. (2023), for instance, link geo-referenced DHS data with conflict data from the UCDP across 35 Sub-Saharan African countries between 1990 and 2020. They find that exposure to armed conflict significantly reduces the likelihood that new mothers deliver in health facilities. Similarly, Kotsadam and Østby (2019) apply the same empirical strategy across 30 Sub-Saharan African countries and find that conflict exposure increases the risk of maternal mortality. Their analysis relies on respondents' reports of sisters dying during pregnancy, childbirth, or the postpartum period.[11]

Additional evidence from specific conflict settings further highlights the detrimental im-

[11] See also Wagner and et al. (2019) for related findings.

pact of violence on women's reproductive health. Torrisi (2024) examines the effects of the rebel insurrection in the northern territories of Mali and finds that conflict exposure is associated with a reduction in the use of modern contraceptives and a corresponding increase in unwanted pregnancies. The findings suggest that this pattern is driven, at least in part, by a decline in women's knowledge about where and how to access contraceptive services. Similarly, Mansour and Rees (2012) investigate the consequences of the Second Intifada on pregnancy outcomes among Palestinian women. Their analysis shows that each additional conflict-related fatality prior to birth is associated with an increased likelihood of adverse outcomes, including low birth weight and complications during late pregnancy.

There is also evidence documenting the adverse effects of conflict on educational outcomes for females. In the context of the intense civil conflict in Peru between the Shining Path insurgency and the national army, both Grimard and Laszlo (2014) and Leon (2012) find long-term negative effects on women's health —particularly height and anemia rates — as well as reduced educational attainment. In the context of Afghanistan, Aslim et al. (2025) explores the long-term effects of prenatal exposure to war violence on children, showing significant gender disparities. Girls exposed in utero suffer worse cognitive and developmental outcomes than boys, with lower school attendance, reduced math performance, and increased functional difficulties.

Similar gendered patterns are evident in other conflict settings. In Rwanda, La Mattina et al. (2017) show that increased exposure to the genocide resulted in lower overall educational investments, with a clear bias in favour of boys over girls. In Tajikistan, Shemyakina (2011) exploits regional and temporal variation in exposure to the 1992–1998 civil war and finds that girls who were of school age during the conflict in affected areas were significantly less likely to complete their mandatory schooling compared to their counterparts in unaffected regions. The study also uncovers a sharp and statistically significant drop in school enrollment for girls, while no comparable effects were observed for boys.

In contrast to the contexts where conflict disproportionately disadvantages girls, several other studies find more gender-neutral effects, or, in some cases, greater adverse impacts for boys. For example, the cross-country analysis by Amberg et al. (2023) suggests that conflict exposure reduces timely childhood vaccinations and the treatment of common childhood illnesses equally for boys and girls. Similarly, Guerra-Cújar et al. (2020) examine the aftermath of the 50-year Colombian conflict with FARC and find no discernible gender differences in changes to health care demand, neonatal or infant mortality, or birth outcomes such as low birth weight or preterm birth rates.

Chamarbagwala and Morán (2011) study the impact of Guatemala's 36-year civil war using census data and conflict event information across departments. They find that conflict exposure negatively affected school completion rates, but the decline was of similar magnitude for boys and girls. Related findings of gender-symmetric impacts on health and education are reported for the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict (Akresh et al. (2012)), the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria (Bertoni et al. (2019)), and Cambodia's civil conflict (Islam et al. (2016)). In some cases, conflict appears to disadvantage boys more. For instance, in Rwanda, Akresh and de Walque (2008) show that genocide exposure significantly reduced primary school completion, with stronger effects for boys. Similarly, in the context of the 2002–2007 civil conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, Minoiu and Shemyakina (2014) find that conflict-induced health setbacks were more severe for young boys than for girls.

Although the existing literature on the gender-differentiated impacts of conflict (particularly on health, educational outcomes, and IPV) is substantial, considerable scope remains for analogous analyses in conflict-affected settings that have not yet been studied. There is also room to broaden the range of outcomes examined, including mental health indicators and other dimensions of well-being that have received less attention. For instance, Hidalgo-Aréstegui et al. (2025) explores how mothers' exposure to civil conflict in Peru impacts their children's socioemotional development and future behaviour, showing that this exposure weakens children's agency and pride and raises their chances of participating in crime-related risky behaviors by age 15.

At the same time, the individual-level factors that lead men exposed to conflict to commit violence against women, including intimate partner violence, are not yet well quantified. Leveraging administrative data alongside lab-in-the-field experiments could help uncover key characteristics and underlying mechanisms driving perpetrator behaviour. Such insights are particularly important for policy: if exposure to conflict triggers mental health issues that increase the risk of violence against women, interventions aimed at improving self-control and emotional regulation may prove effective in mitigating these outcomes.

Furthermore, many existing studies rely on cross-sectional variation in conflict exposure as a quasi-experimental approach to identify effects. While this strategy has yielded valuable insights, future work could build on and improve these designs to enhance causal identification, possibly by incorporating longitudinal data or exploiting more plausibly exogenous sources of variation. There is also considerable scope to leverage experimental methods, both to strengthen identification and to explore innovative outcomes related to gendered well-being that remain under-examined in the current

literature.

Another important consideration is data availability. Much of the current literature relies heavily on DHS data for key outcome variables. However, the sustainability of this critical data source is now in question following the suspension of USAID funding, which has historically been the program's main financial supporter. This development raises concerns about the continued collection and accessibility of high-quality, nationally representative health and demographic data, particularly in conflict-prone countries, and underscores the need for investment in alternative data sources and collection strategies.

3.5 Demographic Shifts

A final major consequence of conflict that disproportionately affects women extensively explored in the literature relates to shifting demographic patterns — changes that, in many cases, do not necessarily work to their disadvantage. Armed conflicts typically result in higher male mortality, thereby systematically altering population sex ratios in favour of women. A substantial body of research has documented the short-term effects of these imbalanced sex ratios on labour markets, marriage markets, and fertility rates. While these demographic imbalances often persist for only one generation, several studies have also identified longer-term consequences. These include pro-women outcomes such as increased female labour force participation, higher educational attainment, greater political representation, and shifts toward more egalitarian gender norms and attitudes within society.

This empirical literature begins with the seminal work of Goldin (1991) and includes later contributions by Acemoglu and Lyle (2004) and Doepke et al. (2015), among others, who study the implications of World War II and demonstrate increases in female labour supply in the United States, alongside corresponding effects on fertility. Brainerd (2017) examines similar dynamics in Russia, finding that male scarcity resulting from war fatalities led to lower marriage and fertility rates, as well as higher rates of non-marital births among women most affected. In the case of Bavaria, Bethmann and Kvasnicka (2013) documents an increase in the non-marital fertility ratio following the war. The study also finds that the magnitude of these effects was smaller in counties with a higher share of prisoners of war (POWs), who were more likely to return home, mitigating the demographic shock.

Abramitzky et al. (2011) instead consider the shock of WWI to study the impacts of male scarcity on marital assortative matching outcomes in France. Using a difference-in-differences approach, the authors confirm that women residing in postwar regions

with higher mortality rates faced a shortage of men in the marriage market and were less likely to marry. On the other hand, men in these regions faced choice and were less likely to marry women from lower social classes. It was also the case that out-of-wedlock births increased and divorce rates decreased. Boehnke and Gay (2022) also show how female labour supply increased, an effect that persisted throughout the interwar period.

In other historical contexts, Alix-Garcia et al. (2022) examine the long-term consequences of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) in South America, which resulted in the deaths of up to 70% of the Paraguayan male population. By combining historical records with contemporary data, the authors show that regions with more skewed post-war sex ratios exhibit higher rates of out-of-wedlock births, a greater prevalence of female-headed households, improved female educational attainment, higher female labour force participation, and more gender-equal social norms — both in the immediate aftermath and persisting into the present day. Teso (2019) investigates the enduring effects of the transatlantic slave trade in Africa, where male population losses led to a reorganization of labor along gender lines. Women assumed roles traditionally held by men, and the study shows that ethnic groups more heavily impacted by the slave trade today display stronger support for female labour force participation. These effects are attributed to the inter-generational transmission of gender norms that evolved in response to historical demographic shocks.

Directly related findings are uncovered for more contemporary examples of large-scale conflict episodes. Studies from the post-war republics of Russia and the Baltics, show that the resulting demographic imbalances contributed to declines in marriage and fertility rates for women (Brainerd (2007)). In the case of the Rwandan genocide, (Kraehnert et al. (2019) and Jayaraman et al. (2009)) uncover similar distortions in marriage markets, while Rogall and Zárate-Barrera (2020), how in villages hit by higher targeted violence during the genocide: women are healthier, better educated and employed, wealthier, and hold more decision-making power.

Another intriguing demographic hypothesis with relevance in conflict contexts is the *Trivers-Willard Hypothesis* (Trivers and Willard (1973)). This theory posits that, in certain species, including humans, maternal condition can influence the sex of offspring as an adaptive strategy to maximize reproductive success. Specifically, females in favourable conditions are hypothesized to favour sons, whose reproductive success is more variable and thus potentially greater, while those in poorer conditions may favour daughters, who have more consistent but typically lower reproductive outcomes. Adverse maternal health shocks around conception or during pregnancy are therefore predicted to result in a skewed sex ratio at birth in favour of females.

Empirical tests of this hypothesis in conflict settings offer compelling support. Valente (2015), for instance, examine in utero exposure to civil conflict in Nepal using a maternal fixed-effects strategy. Their results show that conflict exposure during pregnancy significantly increases the likelihood of both spontaneous abortion and female births. This suggests that male fetuses are more vulnerable to maternal stress or deprivation in utero. Similarly, Catalano et al. (2006) investigates the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and finds a temporary decline in the male-to-female sex ratio at birth, consistent with the predictions of the Trivers-Willard hypothesis. These findings underscore the subtle yet profound biological and demographic consequences of conflict-related stress.

4 Females as Conflict Actors

The previous section focused on the direction of causality running from conflict to gendered outcomes, emphasizing the ways in which women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence and disruption. We now shift the perspective from viewing women primarily as victims to recognizing them as active agents in conflict settings. Women are not only deeply affected by war but are also key participants in resistance movements and central actors in peace-building and post-conflict recovery processes. As such, they can also play a direct and influential role in shaping conflict dynamics and outcomes.

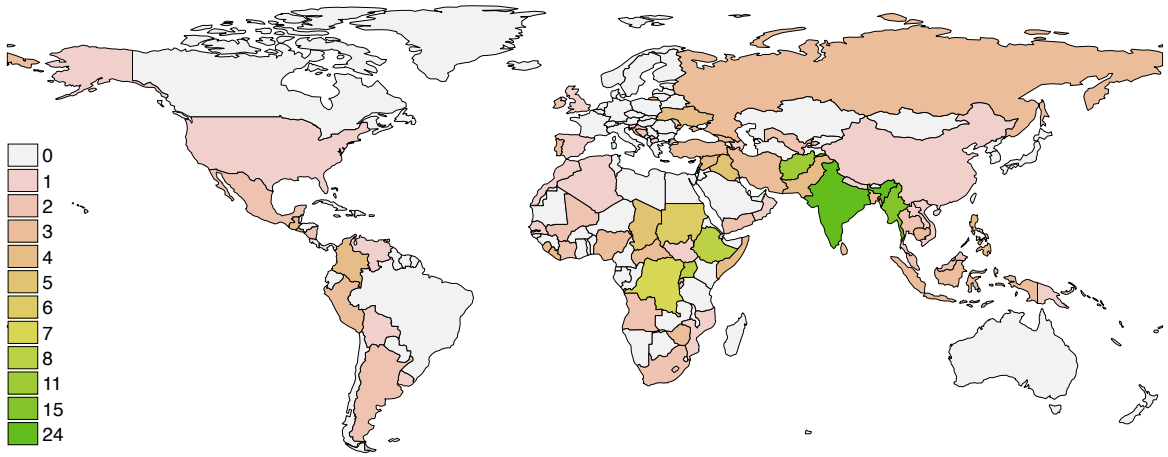
The reverse direction of causality, from gender equality to conflict outcomes, particularly through the channel of women's participation in political decision-making, has received relatively limited attention in the economics literature. This gap may stem from challenges related to data availability and the difficulty of identifying causal relationships with empirical precision. However, political science scholars have made significant strides in constructing cross-national databases that track women's roles in resistance movements, peace processes and political participation during and after conflict. These emerging data sources present valuable opportunities for future research in economics, particularly for studies employing robust empirical strategies to better understand the role of gender equality in conflict resolution and prevention.

4.1 Women as Resistance Fighters

One such dataset is the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) database, compiled by Loken and Matfess (2024), which provides detailed information on over 370 rebel organizations involved in civil conflicts between 1946 and 2015. The authors construct 22 distinct indicators capturing various dimensions of women's participation

in these groups, ranging from combat and leadership roles to logistical and support activities. The WAAR database is accompanied by a comprehensive handbook offering qualitative assessments of women's involvement in each organization.[12] Figure 6 illustrates the global distribution of rebel groups that included female members, highlighting substantial geographic variation in women's participation across different conflict settings.

Figure 6: Rebel Groups with Female Participation



Notes: Data Sources: WAAR. Total number of rebel groups with female participation between 1946-2015.

The majority of rebel organizations in this WAAR data sample (63%) include women in some capacity. The study by Loken and Matfess (2024) finds that among these groups that do involve women, close to half include women on the front-line; and also in leadership roles. Disaggregating the leadership positions, the authors further uncover that more than a quarter of groups include women in the military hierarchy while more than a third incorporate women into political or auxiliary leadership. Further to this, many groups operate a women's wing. These can be women's political, auxiliary, or otherwise non-combat organizations; or a women's military unit. Non-combat roles for women include, for example, medics, spies, weapons smugglers, planners, administrators, recruiters, mobilizers, radio or weapons operators and guards, as well as public-facing roles such as fundraisers, recruiters, educators and propagandists. The presence and prevalence of women in these organizations can vary by ideology. Considering the 323 groups appearing in both the WAAR project and the Foundations of Rebel Governance (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020)), 76% of leftist organizations integrate women in some capacity and 62% of religious groups do so. Moreover, roughly

[12]See: https://www.waarproject.com/

two-thirds of leftist organizations incorporate women as leaders, as compared to 40% of religious groups and almost half of nationalist groups.[13]

Brannon et al. (2024) investigate whether the inclusion of women in rebel groups contributes positively to peace processes. Their analysis focuses on 112 African rebel organizations engaged in civil wars between 1989 and 2014. Utilizing the UCDP Dyadic Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD), the study tracks episodes of formal negotiations between rebel groups and state actors over time. The authors find a significant positive correlation between the presence of women in rebel groups and the likelihood of initiating peace talks. Their empirical strategy accounts for potential confounders, including the ideological orientation and relative strength of rebel organizations.

In related work, Eslava (2024) explores the Colombian FARC guerrilla group and finds that female leadership within the organization is associated with a reduced frequency of violent attacks. This pacifying effect is amplified in municipalities governed by female mayors, pointing to potential gender-based synergies in conflict de-escalation and peace negotiations.

Following conflict, many rebel groups transition into formal political parties. Brannon (2023) examine the electoral success of former female rebels between 1970 and 2020. These findings reveal considerable heterogeneity in outcomes. Female ex-combatants who held elite roles — such as leadership or combat positions — are more likely to secure electoral seats. However, associations with past perpetration of violence significantly reduce voter support for these women, even among those with high-status wartime roles. This suggests that perceptions of violence may override recognition of leadership experience when shaping post-conflict political legitimacy of women.

Not all female participation in rebel groups is voluntary, nor does it necessarily serve to their benefit. In many cases, recruitment into armed groups places females at extreme disadvantage. An alternative dataset compiled by Haer and Böhmelt (2018), the Girl-Child Soldier Dataset (G-CSDS), focuses specifically on the recruitment of girls under the age of 18 by armed groups during the period 1989–2013.[14] According to the dataset, approximately half of all rebel organizations across conflict-dyad-periods recruited girl soldiers. In some cases, such recruitment occurred on a substantial scale; for instance, within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, over 15% of all child soldiers were girls. Among the entire sample of rebel groups that recruited girls, 37% involved them in combat roles. However, in most cases, girls were employed in subordinate, exploitative capacities—serving as domestic workers, porters, or sexual slaves.

[13]See also Wood and Thomas (2017).

[14]Refer to: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/F8U9JE.

Annan et al. (2011) conduct extensive survey-based research on formerly abducted women who had been conscripted into the LRA. The context of the LRA offers a unique quasi-experimental setting, as both male and female recruitment occurred predominantly through abduction, which the authors argue was effectively random. This enables causal identification by comparing abducted individuals with non-abducted peers from the same age group and geographic region. Within the LRA, a strict moral code regulated nearly all aspects of behaviour, from combat to diet to religious practice. Sexual relations were officially restricted to sanctioned, coercive unions, with "bush wives" assigned as a form of status and reward within the LRA hierarchy. Senior commanders often received multiple girls, effectively institutionalizing sexual slavery. While abducted girls also served auxiliary roles — such as cooks, water carriers, and porters — many were also trained to carry weapons, though more frequently for defensive than offensive purposes.

The study finds that participation in the LRA is strongly associated with elevated levels of psychological distress among women in the post-conflict period. Nonetheless, a striking degree of resilience is also observed. Many formerly abducted girls successfully reintegrate into their communities and show comparable outcomes to non-abducted peers on standard economic and human capital indicators.

Despite the growing body of research on the participation of women in armed groups, there is still a significant gap when it comes to understanding women not merely as participants but as active perpetrators of violence and the consequences they face. Most existing studies on female combatants focus on rebel groups or rely on survey evidence, leaving significant gaps in understanding their mental health, economic reintegration, and long-term societal impacts. Although Annan et al. (2011) offers valuable insights on the challenges of reintegration faced by women who the LRA formerly abducted, there is limited research on their roles as combatants, whether voluntary or forced, and how their role as interrogators or enforcers of violence, affect their lives after conflict, including the impacts on their families, close networks, and social reintegration.

The existing literature primarily focuses on women as victims of recruitment or as passive participants in auxiliary roles, overlooking their agency in committing acts of violence and the trauma associated with perpetration. This gap is particularly relevant given that perpetrating violence can lead to different forms of psychological distress, moral injury, and social stigma that differ from victimization experiences (Blattman and Annan, 2010).

Furthermore, research on the inter-generational transmission of these effects, meaning how women's experiences may influence their children's development, attitudes toward

violence, and gender norms, remains underexplored.

Finally, there is also limited causal evidence examining whether female combatants exhibit systematically different patterns of violence or conflict behavior compared to their male counterparts. While literature suggests that women may be more inclined toward peaceful solutions in political contexts, rigorous causal evidence on whether female fighters are less violent, employ different tactics, or demonstrate greater openness to negotiations during active conflict remains scarce (Eslava, 2024; Brannon et al., 2024). Understanding whether women can take pacifier roles in different conflict settings is also essential, as it would have meaningful implications for both conflict prevention strategies and post-conflict justice and reintegration mechanisms.

4.2 Women as Peace-Builders

There is a substantial body of qualitative and case study work documenting the constructive role that female leaders have played in peace processes across both historical and contemporary contexts (Barnhart and Trager (2023)). This has been complemented by a growing number of quantitative studies aiming to rigorously assess these links.

Good (2024) investigates the gender composition of peace negotiation actors by extracting all comprehensive peace agreements finalized between 1990 and 2021 across 54 countries from the Peace Agreements Database (PA-X).[15] The author manually codes the gender of every individual mentioned in the agreements using both the original and translated texts. The findings reveal that the presence of women in peace negotiations is positively correlated with the inclusion of gender-specific provisions in the final agreements. Crucially, the effect is conditional on women occupying positions of authority - mere presence alone is insufficient to generate substantive inclusion.

In directly related research, Thomas (2024) explores whether peace agreements include gender-inclusive provisions, as coded in the Women and Peace Agreements (PA-X Women) database.[16] The key explanatory variable in this study is the proportion of women in each rebel organization's fighting force. Because a single agreement may be signed by multiple groups, the author aggregates this measure to the conflict level. The empirical analysis further includes controls for the strength of both domestic and international women's movements, as well as other potential confounding factors. The results indicate that a higher prevalence of female combatants is positively associated with peace agreements that incorporate gender-sensitive provisions, particularly those aimed at supporting marginalized women and ensuring that disarmament, demobiliza-

[15] Refer to: https://pax.peaceagreements.org/
[16] Refer to: https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/wggsearch/

tion, and reintegration (DDR) processes, as well as post-conflict rehabilitation programs, are inclusive of the specific needs of female fighters.

These quantitative studies consistently show a significant positive correlation between women's participation in peace-building processes and improved outcomes. However, they often fall short of establishing a causal relationship between female leadership and conflict reduction. One exception is Eslava (2024), which provides causal evidence from Colombia. Using close elections between male and female mayoral candidates as a natural experiment, the study finds that municipalities led by women experienced fewer guerrilla attacks, possibly due to more effective conflict de-escalation strategies. Still, this effect may not be generalizable.

For instance, Dube and Harish (2020) examine monarchies in historical Europe to compare the behaviour of queens and kings. Using an instrumental variable approach that exploits variation in hereditary versus non-hereditary succession laws, the authors find that queens were, on average, more likely to engage in war than kings. However, these aggregate results obscure important heterogeneities: single queens were more likely to be attacked than single kings, whereas married queens were more likely to initiate conflict than their male counterparts.

These latter findings may resonate with a growing body of experimental literature in international relations exploring how gender stereotypes influence foreign policy decision-making. Some studies suggest that female leaders may feel political pressure to counteract perceptions of weakness by adopting more hawkish positions during military crises (Schwartz and Blair (2020)). For instance, in a series of online hypothetical survey experiments, Blair and Schwartz (2023) show that subjects are more likely to penalize female leaders, at least in the short term, for pursuing peaceful strategies.

4.3 Women in Grassroots Movements

Aside from the challenges of finding creative identification strategies to test the causal relationship from female leadership roles or political participation to conflict reduction, this relationship is conceptually complicated by the fact that conflict exposure may also incite women to mobilize politically.

A complementary strand of the literature, primarily qualitative and case-based, emphasizes how conflict situations can catalyze women's informal political engagement, particularly through mobilization in civil society organizations, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or grassroots social movements. In such contexts, women often step into the public sphere to articulate collective grievances, engage in political protest, and advocate for social change. This form of informal political participation

can be facilitated by the demographic imbalances discussed earlier, which open up new social and political spaces for women to occupy (Rogall and Zárate-Barrera (2020)). Alternatively, women's mobilization may be driven by a shared sense of threat, especially in response to conflict-related GBV. In this context, GBV is experienced not only as individual victimization but also as a collective assault on women as a social group, prompting political action aimed at transforming their sociopolitical conditions.

Kreft (2018), for example, presents cross-national evidence showing a positive correlation between high levels of conflict-related sexual violence and increased women's protest activity, as well as stronger connections to international women's NGOs.[17] The study controls for key confounding variables such as conflict intensity, regime type, economic development, and measures of women's civil liberties, strengthening the case for a substantive link from conflict-related GBV and women's collective political engagement.

In related work, García-Ponce (2022) uses micro-level data to investigate the legacy of Peru's Shining Path insurgency on women's engagement in local politics. Using information on all candidates running in local elections in a difference-in-differences research design, the study shows that electoral gender quotas were more successful in municipalities exposed to greater insurgency. The elected female candidates tended to have previous experience in grassroots organizations with networks that had expanded during the conflict. While larger effects are observed in areas that were controlled by the insurgents, the positive effects of conflict on female political participation are reversed in areas strongly affected by sexual violence (mostly perpetrated by state forces). These latter findings contrast with the correlational evidence of Kreft (2018), and are instead more consistent with those found in Section 3.3, whereby GBV incidence works to the detriment of female autonomy.

These findings complicate the bidirectional relationships depicted in Figure 3 and further emphasize the challenges to identifying causal mechanisms for understanding the relationship between gender inequities and conflict experience.

Furthermore, women's grassroots mobilization can also play an essential role in community protection and peace advocacy, often filling gaps when formal institutions fail. For example, in Peru, women were part of self-defense committees during the internal conflict, where they managed early warning systems, gathered information, and facilitated negotiations. In a same way, The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace united thousands across ethnic lines to influence the 2003 peace negotiations through protests.

[17] A related correlational country-level study by Agerberg and Kreft (2020) finds a robust positive relationship between the prevalence of gender-based sexual violence in conflict and the subsequent adoption of national legislative gender quotas.

Similar mobilizations include the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Women's League in Burma, and the Mothers of Soacha in Colombia, among others. All of these initiatives leverage women's community ties and their authority in a context of significant instability. However, there is limited evidence regarding their effectiveness, organizational dynamics, and long-term impacts on women's political empowerment.

5 Gender-based Policies and Conflict

The previous two sections underscore the multifaceted relationship between gender and conflict. The first section emphasizes the disproportionate suffering endured by women as victims of conflict. The second suggests that efforts to address these harms effectively may require the direct inclusion of women in decision-making processes and policy development. While such gender-inclusive initiatives are increasingly being implemented, their impacts remain underexplored in empirical research.

The landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, affirmed the critical role of women in conflict prevention, resolution, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and post-conflict reconstruction. Subsequent Security Council statements urged the development of concrete strategies, including clear goals and timelines, for integrating gender perspectives into humanitarian operations, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts. One major outcome was the creation of National Action Plans (NAPs), typically developed by state governments in collaboration with NGOs. By 2008, 11 countries had adopted such plans (Fritz et al. (2009)).[18]

Western states have increasingly allocated substantial portions of their official development assistance (ODA) to gender-related initiatives, and gender equality has gained prominence in foreign policy discourse. The Nordic countries and Canada, in particular, have built reputations for prioritizing gender issues and women's empowerment in both foreign and development policy. Sweden became the first country to formally adopt a *Feminist Foreign Policy* in 2015, followed by Canada. However, recent data suggests a troubling reversal. For the first time in a decade, the share of bilateral allocable ODA dedicated to gender equality has declined (OECD (2024)).[19] This downward trend is concerning, as gender-targeted aid can play a critical role in encouraging conflict-affected states to prioritize gender equality in their own policies and institutions.

[18]These countries included Austria, Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

[19]In 2019–20, 45% of bilateral allocable ODA targeted gender equality objectives, but this fell to 42% in 2021–22. Although the absolute volume increased from USD 57 billion to USD 60.4 billion, this rise was proportional to the overall increase in ODA, and recent cuts suggest a likely future decline.

Other international interventions like UN peace operations have increasingly prioritized gender equality objectives (Kreft (2016)). Research indicates that some of these efforts have contributed to the adoption of gender quotas in formal political institutions, as well as the promotion of women's participation in informal political spaces (Bush (2011)). For instance, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) introduced a gender quota in Kosovo's electoral system in 2000, a measure that remains in effect today. Similarly, UN peacekeeping missions have partnered with women's civil society organizations to support women's political engagement in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Mali, and Sudan.[20]

In addition to influencing host-state political structures, the UN has also sought to promote gender equality within peacekeeping operations themselves. The Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy (UGPS) 2018–2028, for example, sets specific targets for increasing the participation of women in military, police, and observer roles within UN missions.[21]

In related initiatives, foreign aid donors have have been committed to Community-Driven Development (CDD) programs as a strategy to promote collective action, democratization, and decentralization. These programs often mandate participation quotas for women as part of their design. CDD has been widely implemented in post-conflict settings as a tool for rehabilitation and local institution-building. Researchers have evaluated randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of CDD interventions in several war-affected countries, including Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Afghanistan, with mixed findings on their impact on women's political behavior.

In Sierra Leone (Casey et al. (2012)) and the DRC (Humphreys et al. (2015)), women in CDD treatment communities were no more likely than those in control communities to attend local meetings or speak publicly during them, suggesting limited behavioural change in terms of political engagement. By contrast, the intervention in Afghanistan incorporated more robust gender-specific provisions: a gender-balanced village development council, equal participation of men and women in council elections and project selection, and a requirement that at least one development project be prioritized by women. The evaluation of this program found significant improvements in female participation in village governance, community activities, and the local economy, as well as greater community support for women's involvement in decision-making processes

[20]The UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) actively supported women's empowerment prior to its closure in December 2023. MONUSCO in the DRC is also undergoing a phased disengagement.

[21]See the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy (UGPS) 2018–2028: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/uniformed-gender-parity-strategy-2018-2028-summary.pdf.

(Beath et al. (2013)).

The United Nations' global commitment to eradicating extreme poverty by 2030 has particular relevance for conflict-affected contexts. According to UN estimates, approximately two in five of the world's extreme poor live in fragile and conflict-ridden states. In such settings, anti-poverty initiatives often target women directly, recognizing their vulnerability and potential as agents of recovery.

One example is the Women's Income Generating Support (WINGS) program, evaluated by Blattman et al. (2016) through a RCT in northern Uganda. Implemented by the humanitarian organization AVSI (Association of Volunteers in International Service), the program provided ultra-poor, war-affected women with a cash grant, five days of business skills training and planning, and continued supervision to support business implementation. The study finds that WINGS significantly increased micro-enterprise ownership and incomes, primarily through petty trading, among the women participants.

In half of the treatment villages, AVSI later returned to facilitate the formation of self-help groups and provided an additional three days of training focused on collaboration. The study demonstrates that this added component, designed to build social capital, further enhanced the economic outcomes of the women. However, a follow-up study by Green et al. (2015) found limited evidence of broader empowerment effects, such as changes in women's agency or reductions in intimate partner violence (IPV).

Bedoya et al. (2019) examines a related multi-faceted government program in Balkh province of Afghanistan. Women in treatment households received a one-time "big-push" package, including a transfer of livestock assets, cash consumption stipend (delivered in 12 monthly installments), skills training, and coaching. The authors uncover significant improvement along multiple dimensions of well-being. The labour choices of the targeted ultra-poor women expanded, poverty reduced in their households and psychological well-being improved. Aiken et al. (2023) demonstrates how the targeting of this program could by improved by also leveraging phone data.

Another set of interventions aims specifically to reduce the incidence of IPV among women in conflict-affected settings. One notable example is the Women for Women International (WfWI) program, implemented across eight countries. This year-long initiative combines economic and social empowerment training for marginalized women survivors of conflict.[22] Recognizing IPV as a major barrier to women's empowerment, the program integrates strategies aimed at reducing violence alongside economic advancement (Gibbs et al. (2018)).

[22]See https://www.womenforwomen.org/ for more information.

A closely related intervention is evaluated by Annan et al. (2017), who study a two-armed program in Côte d'Ivoire. In this study, the control group received access to a joint savings scheme, while the treatment group received the same financial program along with eight sessions of a gender dialogue curriculum. These sessions focused on household decision-making, communication, and non-violent behaviour. The results show that women in the treatment group experienced significantly fewer symptoms of PTSD and lower rates of IPV.[23]

Another promising avenue for intervention is to promote shifts in attitudes toward gender-based violence and reporting from an early age, particularly in areas previously affected by conflict. In collaboration with Mozambique's Ministry of Education, Amaral et al. (2024) implemented a randomized intervention aimed at strengthening school capacity to address gender-based violence and enhancing students' awareness and proactive behaviours. The program led to significant reductions in sexual violence, and increased girls' school enrollment—driven in part by higher reporting rates—suggesting that combining perpetrator deterrence with victim empowerment can effectively mitigate gender violence in educational settings that were previously affected by conflict.

Relatedly, efforts to reduce gender-based violence in post-conflict settings could also focus on working directly with perpetrators to address the underlying drivers of such behaviour, including harmful gender norms, trauma, and mental health challenges.

Despite these promising results, evaluating gender-focused interventions in active conflict zones remains logistically and ethically challenging. Post-conflict settings and refugee camps may offer more practical opportunities for conducting rigorous policy evaluations. Expanding such research is crucial to understanding what works in addressing gender-based violence and promoting women's empowerment in fragile contexts.

6 Conclusion

This paper has sought to synthesize the quantitative literature exploring the relationship between gender and armed conflict, guided by two overarching perspectives: women as victims and women as actors. Women's roles in both capacities are central across all three stages of conflict — before, during, and after. This is in part due to the multidirectional relationship between gender equality and conflict. On the one hand, armed conflict tends to exacerbate gender inequalities, particularly during and in the aftermath of violence. On the other hand, greater gender equality is associated with

[23]See also Gupta et al. (2013) for a related study.

a reduced likelihood of conflict onset. These bidirectional dynamics complicate causal inference and make it difficult to isolate the mechanisms at play — perhaps one reason why the economics literature has, to date, often under-emphasized gender in conflict research.

Nonetheless, there is substantial scope for economists to contribute meaningfully to this field. Much of the existing work in economics has focused on documenting the long-term consequences of GBV during conflict on the well-being of women and girls. A smaller but growing body of experimental literature has begun evaluating the impacts of group-based economic and social interventions targeting women in conflict-affected settings. However, significant gaps remain.

This paper has highlighted the availability of several innovative datasets that capture both perspectives, women as victims and as agents, in conflict settings. These data resources remain relatively underutilized by economists. There is also promising potential to develop and integrate new datasets, particularly with the increasing use of large language models, which could be applied to the extensive textual records on conflict resolution processes. Moreover, there is a pressing need for more experimental research focused directly on evaluating interventions to reduce GBV and other forms of gender-based discrimination in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

Economists are well-equipped to bring analytical political economy tools to bear on questions concerning the role and impact of women's representation in both formal institutions and informal, grassroots political structures. Theoretical frameworks that explicitly incorporate the political economy dynamics behind women's inclusion (or exclusion) in peace-building and conflict resolution processes could yield valuable insights.

Finally, it is worth more formally theorizing why some armed actors engage in gender-based violence while others do not. Understanding these divergent behaviours could help to uncover the deeper strategic, institutional, or ideological mechanisms underlying GBV in war, and inform more targeted and effective policy responses.

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